There was an article in Friday's paper about Mike Riley's coaching style. It wasn’t about X’s and O’s but about his relationship with the young men he coaches.

His style is very different from his predecessor’s – that’s obvious. He is much less direct. There is no yelling, no monitoring of classroom attendance. He doesn’t impose strict discipline or model a dynamic style of leadership. There is only this motto: “Do the right thing.”

For this style of coaching to work, Mike Riley must make some assumptions about the young men who play for him: that they are talented athletes, that they want the team to win, that they are willing to learn from their mistakes and take just criticism.

I think he also expects them to understand that they will succeed, or fail, together. And so he expects them to also take responsibility for each other as well as for themselves. Correcting one another, encouraging one another, teaching one another: that is part of doing the right thing.

All of these expectations rest in turn on one more basic assumption: these are good men, good people.

I guess that article caught my attention because for the last couple of weeks I’ve been thinking about today's first reading from the Book of Wisdom:

Lord, you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned. But you spare all things, because they are yours, ... for your imperishable spirit is in all things.
Therefore, you rebuke offenders little by little, warn them and remind them of the sins they are committing, that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in you.

God expects us to “do the right thing,” though he doesn’t force us to do it. But that doesn’t mean that he abandons us to our folly and our wickedness. He knows we need help, so he gives us instruction and encouragement, and the strength that comes from grace.

But how is it precisely that God does these things for us? How does he gently rebuke us and remind us of our sins so that we may abandon wickedness and believe in him?

As I prepare for homilies, I talk with my wife about the readings. So this month she knew I was drawn to the reading from Wisdom. When I asked her on Friday evening to read the article on Mike Riley I think she was a little surprised that I thought it might be relevant. Still, she read the article, and, setting the paper aside, said: “Surely you’re not going to tell them that Mike Riley is like God?”

“No, of course not,” I replied, “that would be Tom Osborne.”

So what connection did I make between that article and this reading?

Who does the rebuking and the reminding and the teaching on the Nebraska football team? The coaches do, of course, but they aren’t the only ones, the players also do it for each other.

God loves each one of us. He knows each one of us. But we are not simply individuals to God. We are his people and, in his providence, he will save his people.

And so it’s not surprising that he instructs us through other people: through those who wrote the scriptures, through the prophets. Even when he came among us, it was as a man, and it was as a man he gave us the Good News.
I guess what I saw in the article was a community gathered for a purpose: men who care for one another, take responsibility for one another, believe in one another, all for the purpose of reaching a common goal.

It’s the way a Christian community should be.

Each of us needs to understand that in his love for us, God wants us to join together, to be part of the community of believers because we need to help each other on the way.

It’s not that God isn’t with us as well. He is with us through grace and in prayer. But we can lose sight of that, -- lose the sense that God is present in our lives. At those times, it helps to have good guides and mentors to help restore our vision, our sense of God.

When God confronted Cain after he had murdered his brother, the Lord asked Cain: “Where is your brother Abel?” He answered, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” It is the sinner who is indifferent to other people.

Every one of us is made in the image of God. Everyone one of us is tainted by Original Sin. There is within us both darkness and light.

When our darker nature rises, we need to be rebuked and to be instructed. We need someone else to help us find our way. That is when we depend on the good in others: on their example, on their instruction, on their relationship with God.

Likewise, when someone turns from the darkness to the light, it should be a matter for rejoicing and continued encouragement.

---

In the Gospel today you sense that people shunned Zacchaeus. They wrote him off: they were not willing to rebuke him nor were they willing to see any good in him.
But Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus. He was at that moment, doing the right thing. And Jesus responded accordingly, drawing him back into communion with the people of God. And Zacchaeus, receiving that encouragement, repented and sought to make amends.

So, in whatever situation you find yourself, in your family, at work or school, here at church, out in the community, or even on a sports team, help those around you to “do the right thing,” ... and let them do the same for you.